

Nibbāna “Exists”, but Not in This World

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Introduction

1. Misconceptions about *Nibbāna* arise because the true meaning of it had been hidden for many hundreds of years. In the previous posts in this series, I have described what *Nibbāna* is. See, [“Nibbāna.”](#)

- The question many people have is, “what happens to an *Arahant* upon death?”. One simply is not reborn anywhere in the 31 realms of this world. It is called *Parinibbāna* (“*pari*” + *Nibbāna*“; meaning “full *Nibbāna*“).
- Until *Parinibbāna*, an *Arahant* lives like a normal person and is subjected to *kamma vipāka*. However, “stressful thoughts that arise due to greed, anger, and ignorance” do not arise in a living *Arahant*. Until the death of the physical body, an *Arahant* has *saupadisēsa Nibbāna*, i.e., *Nibbāna* is not complete.

2. It is not possible to “describe” *Nibbāna* (or more precisely what happens after *Parinibbāna*) in terms of the terminology rooted in “this world”. [Not a single word that we use can be used to describe what *Nibbāna* is like.](#)

- We simply do not have any “data” or “concepts” or “terminology” that pertain to *Nibbāna* because those would be totally foreign to us living in “this world”.
- One crude analogy would be trying to explain to a fish what life is like outside the water. A fish would not understand the need to breathe air instead of water.
- Another would be like trying to explain to a person who has time-traveled from thousand years ago, how radio or television works. He would not have sufficient “data” to be able to comprehend how radio or TV works.

Suttā on Nibbāna

3. [But *Nibbāna* “exists” because one can attain it.](#) But it does not exist in this world of 31 realms.

- There are four *suttā* in the *Udāna* section of the *Anguttara Nikāya* that explain *Nibbāna* (*Udāna* 8.1 through 8.4.)
- Once you open a *sutta* at the Sutta Central website, click on the left-most drop-down to choose one of several languages. This is a good resource; consider making a donation if you find it useful. **Note: I am not associated with Sutta Central.**
- Of source, the translations are incorrect frequently for key Pāli words, as is the case for many websites/books. But at least one can see the correct Pāli version.

Paṭhama Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta – Nibbāna Exists

3. Let us look at the first *sutta*, [“*Paṭhama Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta*“](#). It says, “*Atthi, bhikkhave, tadāyatanaṃ, yattha neva pathavī, na āpo, na tejo, na vāyo, na ākāsānañcāyatanaṃ, na viññāṇañcāyatanaṃ, na ākiñcaññāyatanaṃ, na nevasaññānāsaññāyatanaṃ, nāyaṃ loko, na paraloko, na ubho candimasūriyā. Tatrāpāhaṃ, bhikkhave, neva āgatiṃ vadāmi, na gatiṃ, na ʻhitiṃ, na cutiṃ, na upapattiṃ; appattiṃhaṃ, appavattaṃ, anārammaṇamevetam. Esevanto dukkhassā”ti.*”

- Let us consider the first part: “*atthi, bhikkhave, tadāyatanaṃ*“. Here “*atthi*” means “exists”, and “*tadāyatana*” is another word for *Nibbāna*. *tadāyatana* comes from “*tath*” + “*āyatana*“, where “*tath*” (pronounced “thath”) means “perfect” and “*āyatana*” means “faculties”. Phonetically, the combined word is “*tadāyatana*” (pronounced “thadaayathana”).
- It is a good idea to be familiar with how to spell Pāli words with the “*Tipitaka* English” convention. It is DIFFERENT from “Standard English.” See, [“*Tipitaka* English” Convention](#)

[Adopted by Early European Scholars – Part 1](#) and [“Tipitaka English” Convention Adopted by Early European Scholars – Part 2](#)

- Thus the translation of “*Atthi, bhikkhave, tadāyatanaṃ*” is, “*Bhikkhus, Nibbāna exists (where everything is perfect)*”.

4. The second part in the blue says what can be said about *Nibbāna*. First, “*appatitṭhaṃ, appavattaṃ, anārammaṇamevetamaṃ*” means, “It is without support (causes), unmoving, without any *ārammaṇa* (thought object.)” The last part in the blue, “*Esevanto dukkhassā”ti*” means, “it is the end of suffering.”

- Therefore, those sentences in the blue state ALL that one can say about *Nibbāna*.
- The rest of that verse (in the red) says what is ABSENT in *Nibbāna*.

Paṭhama Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta – What is Absent in Nibbāna

5. The first part marked in deep red is, “**there is no *patavi, āpo, tējo, vāyo (mahā bhūta)* there; there is no *ākāsānañcāyatana, no viññāṇañcāyatana, no ākiñcaññāyatana, no nevasaññānāsaññāyatana; furthermore, there is no “this world (that we experience), there is no *para loka* (where *gandhabbā* live, see, “[Hidden World of the Gandhabba: Netherworld \(*para loka*\)](#)”); and the Moon or the Sun would not arise there***” (*candimasūriyā* is Moon and the Sun).

The second part marked in red says, “*Bhikkhus, I say there is surely no coming and going between *ayam loko* and *para loko*, no living in either of those, no passing away (*cuti*), no birth.*”

- The absence of *patavi, āpo, tējo, vāyo* means NOTHING made of matter that we see around us (people, animals, trees, other planets or stars) is there in *Nibbāna*.
- So, all that we experience (including *jhāna*) will not be there, after *Parinibbāna*, as discussed in #2 above.
- And, of course, there is no *gandhabba* going back and forth between “*ayam loko*” and “*para loko*.”
- Our terminology regarding ANYTHING AT ALL simply does not apply there.

Without *Nibbāna* There Would Not Be an End to Suffering

6. The *Tatiya Nibbāna Paṭisaṃyutta Sutta* (Udāna 8.3) has the following key verse: “*Atthi, bhikkhave, ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ. No ce taṃ, bhikkhave, abhaviṣṣa ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ, na yidha jātaṃ bhūtaṃ katassa saṅkhataṃ nissaraṇaṃ paññāyetha. Yasmā ca kho, bhikkhave, atthi ajātaṃ abhūtaṃ akataṃ asaṅkhataṃ, tasmā jātaṃ bhūtaṃ katassa saṅkhataṃ nissaraṇaṃ paññāyati”ti*

Translated: “*Bhikkhus, “not born”, “not formed”, “not made”, “not conditioned” exists.*

For *Bhikkhus, if there had not been that which is “not born”, “not formed”, “not made”, “not conditioned”, an escape here from the born, become, made, and conditioned cannot be discerned.* But *Bhikkhus, since there is a “not born”, “not formed”, “not made”, “not conditioned”, an escape from the born, become, made, and conditioned is evident.*”

- The “not born”, “not formed”, “not made”, “not conditioned” is *Nibbāna*. It is reached by **eliminating** all that is formed, made, and conditioned.
- In other words, “this world” comes to existence (for a given person) because of the *bhava* and *jāti* built via defiled thoughts (*saṅkhāra*) generated due to *avijjā* (in the *Paṭicca Samuppāda* process.) With the cessation of *avijjā*, that mechanism or process stops and no more rebirths will be possible. That results in *Nibbāna*.
- There are two more companion *suttā* that describe *Nibbāna*: “[Dutiyanibbānapatisamyutta Sutta \(Ud 8.2\)](#)” and “[Catutthanibbānapatisamyutta Sutta \(Ud 8.4\)](#).” The translations available there are good enough to get further insights.

The Fire Analogy

7. One time, the inquisitor Vacchagotta (there is a whole series of *suttā* in the *Vacchagottavagga* of the *Samyutta Nikāya* about his probing questions put forth to the Buddha), asked the Buddha what happens to an *Arahant* upon death: “Where would he/she go?”.

- The Buddha showed him a burning fire, and asked him, “when this fire is extinguished, can you say where it went?”. Vacchagotta understood. When the fire is extinguished, it simply is not there anymore. That is all one can say. In the same way, when an *Arahant* dies, he/she is not reborn and thus cannot be “found” anywhere in the 31 realms.
- On the other hand, someone with *abhiññā* powers (with the *cutūpapāda ñāna*) can see where a normal person is reborn upon death. That life-stream exists somewhere in the 31 realms.

Rāgakkhaya Dosakkhaya Mohakkhaya— Idam Vuccati Nibbānan

8. The Buddha could only explain to us the way to attain *Nibbāna*, by relinquishing our desire for worldly things based on the unsatisfactory nature (or the *anicca* nature) of this world.

- The Buddha said, “*rāgakkhaya dosakkhaya mohakkhaya— idam vuccati nibbānan*” *tī*“, i.e., one attains *Nibbāna* via getting rid of *rāga*, *dōsa*, *mōha* in one’s mind. [Thus cleansing our minds is the only way to Nibbāna](#). See, for example, *Nibbānapañhā Sutta* (SN 38.1) and *Sāmañḍaka Sutta* (SN 39.1.)
- However, it is not possible to even start on “*rāgakkhaya*” until one gets to the *Sōtapanna* stage. “*Rāgakkhaya*” attained partially at the *Anāgami* stage (via removal of *kāma rāga*) and fully at the *Arahant* stage (via removal of *rūpa rāga* and *arūpa rāga*). A *Sōtapanna* reduces *dōsa* to *paṭigha* level (removed at the *Anāgāmi* stage), and *mōha* to *avijjā* level (removed at the *Arahant* stage).
- In the new section, “[Living Dhamma](#)“, we discuss these points and start from a basic level, even without referring to deeper concepts like rebirth.

Nibbāna Reached In Stages

9. The point is that *Nibbāna* is to be comprehended in stages.

- The very first stage of *Nibbāna* or “*Niveema*” or “cooling down” can be experienced even before getting to the *Sōtapanna* stage. In fact, it is not possible to get to the *Sōtapanna* stage by skipping this step.
- To attain the *Sōtapanna* stage one MUST comprehend the *anicca* nature of this world to some extent. In order for the mind to grasp that concept, it must be free of the “coarse defilements” or “*panca nivāraṇa*” or “five hindrances” that cover one’s mind.
- For that one MUST live a moral life, start contemplating Buddha Dhamma, and experience the “cooling down” that results.

10. Many people try to attain or comprehend *Nibbāna* by reading about deep concepts about what it is. There are so many books out there on explaining what *Nibbāna* is, by people who may not have experienced even the basic “cooling down” or “*nirāmisā sukha*“.

- They try to explain concepts like *sunyata* or “emptiness” and *bodhicitta*; see, “[What is Sunyata or Sunyata \(Emptiness\)?](#)“. That is a complete waste of time because as we saw above, it is not possible to describe *Nibbāna* with words that we know.
- [Rather, one starts experiencing Nibbāna in stages](#). One can start experiencing the RELIEF or COOLING DOWN that results when one starts living a moral life and start discarding *dasa akusala* in STAGES.
- [Furthermore, it is important to understand that one does not start on the Path by first comprehending the anicca nature; the anicca nature will gradually become clear](#).
- The Buddha clearly stated the importance of following a gradual Path in the “[Maha Chattarisaka Sutta \(Discourse on the Great Forty\)](#)“. Also, see, “[Buddha Dhamma – In a Chart](#)“.
- Even a person who does not believe in rebirth can start from this level: “[Living Dhamma](#)“.

Nibbāna Is Not a Dhamma – It Is a Paramatta Dhamma

11. In the post, “[The Grand Unified Theory of Dhamma – Introduction](#)“, we saw that everything that EXISTS, can be put into four ultimate constituents (*paramatta dhamma*):

- (i) Thoughts (*citta*)
- (ii) Thought qualities or mental factors (*cētasika*)
- (iii) Matter (*rūpa*)
- (iv) *Nibbāna*

- Any *dhamma* in this world is normally a COMBINATION of ALL THREE of the **first three paramatta dhamma**. Note that *Dhammā* “bear” things in this world.
- The fourth *paramatta dhamma* in the list above, *Nibbāna*, does not exist within the 31 realms. But *Nibbāna* exists, i.e., it can be attained. An *Arahant* merges with *Nibbāna* at the death of his/her physical body.
- ***Nibbāna* is NOT *dhamma*. It does not “bear” anything in this world.**

Nibbāna Can Be Experienced in Nirōdha Samāpatti

12. Let us discuss some relevant characteristics of an *Arahant*, i.e., one who has attained *Nibbāna*. He/she cannot experience *Nibbānic* bliss (experience of full *Nibbāna*) unless getting into *Nirōdha Samāpatti*. An *Arahant* can experience *Nirōdha Samāpatti* for a maximum of seven days at a time.

- When an *Arahant* is in *Nirōdha Samāpatti*, there are no *citta* or thoughts flowing through his/her mind. There is no breathing and is not very different from a dead body (other than the fact that the body of the *Arahant* will have normal body temperature.) The point is, that *Arahant* will not be able to explain to us “the experience of *Nibbāna*“. In our terminology, all he/she can say is that he/she did not experience any “worldly thoughts”.
- At other times, an *Arahant* will be experiencing “this world” just like another human: he/she will recognize people/things, sounds, smells, etc. The only exception is that thoughts burdened with *rāga*, *dōsa*, *mōha* cannot arise: *Asobhana* (non-beautiful) *cetasika* are absent in those thoughts; see, “[What Are Kilesa \(Mental Impurities\)? – Connection to Cetasika](#)“.
- But he/she will be engaged in *puñña kriya* (meritorious deeds like delivering discourses), just like the Buddha did; they are just “actions”, and are not *puññābhisankhāra* or *puñña abhisankhāra*.

Nibbāna and Parinibbāna

13. Here is another interesting point. Some *Arahants* may have *kammic* energy for the “human *bhava*” left when he/she dies; see, “[Bhava and Jāti – States of Existence and Births Therein](#)“. But still, there will not be another rebirth for any *Arahant* **in this world of 31 realms**.

- The reason is that the “status of the *Arahanthood*” could not be borne (or sustained) by any other “finer body” than a dense human body. For example, if he/she were to be reborn human, then a human *gandhabba* need to come out of the dead human body; see, “[gandhabba \(Manomaya Kaya\)](#)“. But the fine body (*trija kaya*) of the *gandhabba* cannot “bear” the energy associated with an *Arahant*.
- In the same way, the fine, subtle “bodies” of a *Deva* or a *Brahma* also cannot sustain the mind of an *Arahant*. Thus, if a *Deva* or a *Brahma* attains the *Arahanthood*, they will immediately attain *Parinibbāna*. In other words, there are no living *Arahants* in *Deva* or *Brahma* realms.

14. We can consider the following analogy to make clear what happens. A heater-coil is immersed in water, can “bear” the current that passes through it, while immersed in boiling water. But if we take a coil out of the water, it will burn. The heater coil cannot “bear” the current passing through it unless immersed in water.

- In the same way, the “*Arahanthood*” can be “borne” or be “sustained” only with a solid human body. Once the *gandhabba* comes out of that body –upon the death of that physical body — the “*Arahanthood*” cannot be “borne” by that very fine body. In fact, the “*Arahanthood*” cannot be “borne” by an even a layperson for more than 7 days. Once attaining the

“*Arahanthood*“, one must become a *Bhikkhu* within 7 days, or one will die because a layperson cannot “bear” the “*Arahanthood*“.

- With *Parinibbāna* (death of an *Arahant*)”the *Nibbāna* is complete”. The Sinhala word is “*pirinivana*“, where “*nivana*” is *Nibbāna* and “*piri*” means “full” or “complete”.
- Therefore, *Nibbāna* exists. But one who has attained “full *Nibbāna*” or *Parinibbāna* will no longer be in this world of 31 realms. One would be totally free of any and all sufferings in this world, including harsh sufferings in the *apāyā*.